

RE-EXAMINING ALMOHAD ECONOMIES IN
SOUTH-WESTERN AL-ANDALUS THROUGH
PETROLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF
ARCHAEOLOGICAL CERAMICS¹

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The most important change in the economy of al-Andalus during the Almohad caliphate was the shift in focus of trade and exchange, from the Mediterranean to the Straits of Gibraltar and the Atlantic seaboard.² While textual sources remain our primary source of information on the economy of this region, ceramic studies have great potential to supplement such evidence.³ Large quantities of ceramic sherds have been discovered at archaeological sites in al-Andalus, a proportion of which were undoubtedly traded items. However, much of the information on the exchange of ceramics, particularly undecorated common-ware forms, remains unexplored, since past studies have been limited. This article introduces the preliminary findings of an innovative approach to the study of Almohad pottery in south-western al-Andalus. The study encompassed a programme of petrological testing of archaeological

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² Christophe Picard, *L'Océan Atlantique Musulman. De la Conquête Arabe à l'Époque Almohade. Navigation et Mise en Valeur des Côtes d'al-Andalus et du Maghrib Occidental (Portugal-Espagne-Maroc)* (Paris: Éditions Maisonneuve & Larose/Éditions UNESCO, 1997), p. 120.

³ Picard, *L'Océan Atlantique Musulman*, pp. 444–445.

ceramics from a range of settlements in the region. Preliminary results, presented here through three case studies, indicate the movement of both decorated and plain common-ware ceramics in south-western al-Andalus.

A host of primary texts documents the key role al-Andalus played in trading networks in Europe, Africa, Arabia, and beyond. Historians suggest that the main reason for this level of trade was a regional specialisation in the production of goods.⁴ During the regimes of both the Almoravids and Almohads, political unification of al-Andalus with the Berber tribes of North Africa resulted in an increased level of trade between these regions, which was focused on the Atlantic Ocean. The reason for this trade was Christian domination of the Mediterranean and conquest of territory in al-Andalus.⁵ At this time, the ports of south-western al-Andalus which provided access to the Atlantic world became increasingly important, and the settlements linked to the Atlantic Ocean developed a solid base of production and exchange. Port cities such as Seville and Mértola, both located on navigable rivers in south-western al-Andalus, flourished in the wake of this increased economic activity.⁶ Cities located inland, such as Écija, may have been the recipients of commodities generated by this economic activity, via a network of terrestrial trade routes.⁷

The growing number of urban archaeological excavations during the past twenty years, which have taken place in the face of modern development, have increased our knowledge of these settlements.⁸ These excavations have enhanced our understanding of urban economies, and the ceramic evidence has proved particularly important, because of its long-term survival in buried conditions, as compared with more per-

⁴ See, for example, Pedro Chalmeta, *El Señor del Zoco en España: Edades Media y Moderna, Contribución al Estudio de la Historia del Mercado* (Madrid: Instituto Hispano-Árabe de Cultura, 1973), p. 17.

⁵ Olivia Remie Constable, *Trade and Traders in Muslim Spain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 69.

⁶ Constable, *Trade and Traders*, p. 120.

⁷ For information on terrestrial routes see, for example, al-Idrīsī, *Los Caminos de Al-Andalus en el siglo XII: según "Uns al-Muḥay' wa-rawd al-Furay'" (Solaz de Corazones y Prados de Contemplación)*, translated by Jassin Abid Mizal (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto de Filología, 1989).

⁸ For the most recent work on how rescue excavations in Seville have increased our understanding of the city, see Magdalena Valor Piechotta and Miguel Ángel Tabales Rodríguez, "La estructura y evolución del caso histórico de Sevilla en época andalusí: Sevilla de *medina* a *ḥaḍirah*", paper presented at the conference entitled "La Ciudad en el Occidente Islámico Medieval", University of Granada, 2004.